THE ADVENT OF GOD
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Psalm 25:1–10
Luke 21:25–36

"When you see these things taking place,
you know that the kingdom of God is near."
Luke 21:31 (NRSV)

Come, O God, into the world with healing and peace.
Come into our lives with joy and passion.
Startle us again this year, O God, with the truth of your Advent.
And give us quiet moments in the busy and noisy days ahead
to hear the singing of angels. Amen.

"What shall I preach about?" the young seminarian asked his homiletics professor.

"Preach about God, and preach about twenty minutes" came the answer.

And so I shall try to do both this morning.

The late Paul Tillich was one of the great minds of the twentieth century. A distinguished philosopher and theologian, Tillich was a refugee from Nazi Germany who came to this country to teach at Union Theological Seminary and Harvard Divinity School and at the end of his career lectured at the University of Chicago—to the whole university community, where it was my privilege to hear him.

Hearing Tillich was not necessarily the same as understanding him. I am one of a multitude, if truth were told, who had a fair amount of difficulty wading through Tillich. He thought like a philosopher—in German—and when he spoke, it was with a heavy German accent. The story is told that Tillich was scheduled to deliver a lecture at a midwestern university. A freshman arranged to see him for a few minutes the afternoon before the lecture.

"Professor Tillich," he said, "I'm sorry, but I have a conflict and I can't attend your lecture. I'm sorry, because I heard you are the greatest

theologian in the world and I have a simple question: What is God like? So, maybe you could just tell me: what is God like?"

The distinguished scholar leaned back in his chair and said,

> Well—
> Historically, God is the one transcendent reality beyond all transient reality.
> Philosophically, God is the dialectical imperative.
> Ontologically, God is the source of all being, being as such.
> Eschatalogically, God is the end of the human impulse toward the apocalyptic.

He stopped and the freshman said, "Huh?"

He asked the right question, didn't he? "What is God like?" You might say it is the one universal question human beings have asked since the beginning of time. You might say "Does God exist?" is the single commanding question behind all human history. On Friday mornings, some of us have been reading through Karen Armstrong's fine book *A History of God*. Her thesis is that the three great monotheisms—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—have experienced God down through the centuries in remarkably similar ways. She writes,

> My study of the history of religion has revealed that human beings are spiritual animals. Indeed there is a case for arguing that Homo sapiens is also Homo religiousus. Men and women started to worship gods as soon as they became recognizably human.

Jack Miles, whose *God: A Biography* was a best-seller a few years ago, says,

> No character on stage, page, or screen has ever had the reception God has had. God is more than a household word in the West: he is, welcome or not, a virtual member of the Western family. Indeed, something like 95 percent of the American people say they believe in God.

The topic of the day, as it always has been, is God. "Everyone," Fred Craddock says, "wants to know about God."

As you can imagine, over the years a minister accumulates a lot of books on the subject of God. In amongst the thick, daunting texts on my shelves—Calvin, Barth, Brunner, Küng, and Tillich—is a little book edited by Stuart Hample and Eric Marshall. Its cover has a stick picture of a child and a bright sun, a blue bird, a green tree. and a row of colorful flowers.

Children's Letters to God. I read it a lot. It's one of my favorite books on the subject.

Here are two of my favorites little letters:

> Dear God,
> Is Reverend Coe a friend of yours or do you just know him through business?
> Donny

and

> Dear God,
> Grandpa says you were around when he was little. How far back do you go?
> Love, Dennis.

Some dare to complain and remonstrate in the best biblical tradition:

> Dear God:
> Thank you for the baby brother but what I prayed for was a puppy.
> Joyce.

and

> Dear God,
> Please send Dennis Clark to a different camp this year.
> Peter.

And some are beautifully, profoundly human:

> Dear God:
> Why do people die? You wouldn't have to keep making new people if you just kept the ones you had.
> Emily

and

> Dear God:
> I don't ever feel alone since I found out about you.
> Nora

Experts in human culture, particularly our post-Enlightenment, rational, Western, consumer culture, concluded a long time ago that the question of God would be more and more marginalized—that the more educated and scientific we became, the less we'd need God, and the more secure and

comfortable we became, the less we'd be interested in God. We live in the post-Christian, post-religious age, it is said. God, some announced, was clearly dead; the idea of God, the need for God, the search for God, was essentially dead, and religion would soon follow.

It hasn't happened, of course. As a matter of fact, those same scholars are now saying that we are living in the midst of a religious boom and that the topic of God has never been hotter—or more relevant, for that matter.

And so we come to Advent, which seems somehow more precious than ever. Perhaps it is because of the terrible things that have happened in the name of God. Perhaps it is because we are here at ground zero in the culture of consumerism, the very heart of the retail economy's determined drive to end the year in the black, here between Bloomingdale's and Lord and Taylor, Paul Stuart and Escada, with our electric sheep quietly grazing and our somber, 1600-year-old hymns.

> Let all mortal flesh keep silence
> And with fear and trembling stand.

Whatever the reason, the season of Advent seems more precious than ever this year. Advent unapologetically invites us to look back into time, all the way back to the time before Jesus, back to the time of his humble birth, and back in our own time, back in memory to the previous Christmases we have experienced in our own lives: the family traditions, the customs lovingly preserved year after year, the favorite recipes, the worn tree ornaments, the star Scotch-taped together, carefully removed from its box to shine one more year. And Advent invites us to look forward to the fulfillment of human history, to the ongoing process of redemption and salvation, and to look forward to God's continuing activity in our own lives. Advent is about God—a God who came into human history in Jesus Christ and a God who promises to continue coming into your history and mine, the history still ahead of us.

The problem is that religion itself gives God a bad name some times.

It is not at all unusual for otherwise thoughtful, mature adults to reject religion and relegate the God question to the intellectual margins because of a bad experience with religion as a child. Fred Craddock, one of the best teachers of preaching around, retired professor from Emory's Candler School of Theology, tells about a woman in a little Methodist church he was serving in Newport, Tennessee, who used to get up and shoot down the aisle out of the church as soon as he was done preaching.

"Why is it that you get up and leave after the sermon, Joanne?" Craddock asked. "She told me that when she was just ten or eleven she was at a service, and after the sermon they sang a hymn, and they sang and sang

and sang. People started going through the congregation," she said. "And the minister came down and took hold of my hand. 'Little girl,' he said, 'do you want to go to hell?' He scared me to death, and so I leave before all that starts" (*Cherry Log Sermons,* p. 51).

Karen Armstrong, a recognized scholar of world religion and popular author, was a nun. She recalls that her childhood and teenage faith had more to do with fear of judgment than gratitude to God and love for God. She had, she said, strong beliefs in doctrines but little faith in God. She says that James Joyce got it right in *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man;* the Roman Catholicism of her childhood was a frightening creed. In fact, hell was a more potent reality than God.

Roman Catholicism has no monopoly on religion as frightening or on God as angry judge. Fear and judgment are still powerful motivators and, for many modern people, the very reason why God seems to be dead and religion not far behind.

And yet, we can't seem to shake the subject. Religion keeps coming back in new forms: in the new spirituality, for instance; in an insatiable appetite for books with spiritual content—*The DaVinci Code*, for instance, an esoteric, slightly bizarre tour, mostly fictional, through church and Christian history. If God is gone and institutional religion is in trouble, spirituality is big business.

It's almost as if there is something about us that yearns for God, almost in spite of the damage done to God's good name, almost as if we are "wired" for religion, almost as if there is an empty space inside each of us that can only be filled by God. St. Augustine was right, it seems, when he wrote 1600 years ago, "O God, thou hast made our hearts restless until they find their rest in thee."

Advent is precious because it comes at the darkest time of the year, just when we most need it, to speak an important and good word about God. Advent invites us to listen carefully for hints at that new and good word about God in our own tradition.

In the Psalter, written at a time when tribal people in the name of their tribal gods were gleefully killing one another, a new and good word about God: "All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and mercy." The fundamental characteristic of God is not, as everybody seems to want to think, a righteous anger, an exclusive love that creates an exclusivistic religious enclave and condemns the rest of humankind to hell, but "steadfast love and mercy." In the history of religious ideas, that is new and revolutionary: a God whose love is most like the selfless love of a mother for her child, which is exactly what the ancient Hebrew word for mercy means.

Advent invites us to listen carefully as other voices pick up the refrain.

> "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you, says the Lord." (Isaiah 66:13)
>
> "As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion." (Psalm 103:13)

Advent invites us to be watchful and alert for that God: the God who is our creator and judge but supremely our redeemer; the God who loves us with an everlasting love from which nothing, not even death itself, can separate us.

Advent comes quietly to invite us—all of us: lifelong believers, skeptics, seekers, the curious, and unbelievers—invites all of us to ponder for a moment a most incredible, most improbable idea: namely that a humble birth in Bethlehem of Judea is the Advent of God, the coming of God into our lives; that behind all the religious rituals human beings have devised to placate an angry God, there is this—a child in a manger; that behind all the strenuous theologizing, all the intellectual abstractions in all the theological textbooks in the world, there is this—a newborn and a mother's and father's awe and love and gratitude.

After more than forty years of doing this, standing up in a pulpit and talking, I think I know why people come to church. It's not what we think. It's not to be seen or to meet potential clients. It's not dry tradition or worn and faded habit. All of that is gone now. No, people come to church looking for God. And the word today is that God came among us in that birth, that life lived lived so selflessly, so kindly, so gently, that life that was not, in fact, snuffed out by death.

The word today is that this is what God is like. This is who God is—that vulnerable child, that courageous and honest and good man.

Advent is an invitation to trust that God: to give your heart to that God, to trust your future to the God who promises to be with you and to come into your life with healing and hope and peace.

It comes soon after our Thanksgiving, Advent does. And for me, over the years, the two occasions have become almost one: Thanksgiving for the goodness of creation and for all the blessings of life. Thanksgiving for the promise of God's steadfast love and mercy. Thanksgiving for Christmas, for Advent, the Advent of God.

Everyone wants to know about that.

Amen.